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ABSTRACT

Instructor skills which are useful in facilitating classroom discussion are described. Suggestions are made for organizing the group (optimal size being 5 to 7 students), establishing agenda and procedures, and identifying responsibilities. Specific techniques are given for managing the flow of ideas, encouraging students to freely exchange ideas while maintaining an objective attitude, and guiding the discussion away from emotion-laden areas. (JD)

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Learning and Evaluation Service
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Classroom Discussion Skills

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Paper #30

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CLASSROOM DISCUSSION SKILLS

This handout describes instructor skills which are useful in facilitating classroom discussion. Before addressing them, however, it should be noted that they work best when the following conditions are met:

CONDITIONS WHICH FACILITATE CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

1. When the number of students is less than 20; the optimal discussion group size being 5-7 students. In a large class, the instructor can: (a) select a random sample of 15-20 students for discussion purposes, while the remaining students observe, or (b) break the class into small groups of 5-7 students each and train students to be discussion leaders.
2. When participants can easily see and hear each other. Typically, this means that students sit in a circle or in a horseshoe shaped configuration where a chalkboard is at the open end.
3. When the goal or purpose of the discussion is clearly stated. For example:
 - (a) The purpose of an issue-centered discussion is to clarify the issue and the values of participants.
 - (b) The purpose of discussing a commonly shared-experience is to better understand an experiment, a field trip, a lecture, etc.
 - (c) The discussion method is most useful for analyzing and solving problems where there is no straightforward known solution and where each participant has information to contribute.(For elaboration, see The Discussion Method by Davis, Fry and Alexander, or refer to a companion handout entitled "A Look at Discussion Groups.")
4. When an agenda is agreed upon. The agenda might include the range of topics to be covered, the questions to be answered, and the time allocated for each.
5. When "ground rules" or procedures for conducting the discussion are agreed upon and enforced. Typical "ground rules" for a problem-solving discussion might be:
 - (a) All points of view will be accepted and posted.
 - (b) Evaluation will be deferred until later.
 - (c) Silence is okay; thinking takes time.
 - (d) Interruptions will be "policed."
 - (e) Disagreement is okay, as long as it's over ideas and doesn't degenerate into personal attacks.
6. When roles and responsibilities are clearly stated. Students, for example, should know what they have to do to prepare for class and then be held accountable.
7. When the instructor assumes a task-facilitative role rather than an expert or authoritative role. To elicit participation and to avoid dominance, the instructor must behave, generally, in a non-evaluative way and accept whatever ideas or opinions group members suggest. Whenever a discussion leader evaluates or criticizes group members, openly disagrees with their ideas, or expresses strong skepticism about their opinions, he/she may unwittingly cause students to be cautious about what they say. Instead of expressing their own ideas, they begin to defer more and more to the leader's opinions, even when he says that he wants them to do just the opposite.

Adopting a task-facilitative role means that the instructor is:

- (a) willing to accept and explore students' ideas and feelings even though he/she may not agree with them,
- (b) willing to allow students to participate fully and develop their ideas even if it means that all of the planned content may not be covered, and
- (c) willing to tolerate a mode of instruction in which the group rewards and motivates participation, and controls the pace of, and to some extent the content of, the discussion.

Examples:

Imagine yourself as a newspaper reporter who is interviewing a person. In assuming such a role, you would naturally be less inclined to express your own views and more inclined to ask questions that stimulate open expression. Your mental set would be to elicit and collect all the relevant information possible. You would be less inclined to evaluate, disagree, or enter into an argument; that sort of behavior would only close up your contact; he would feel threatened.

Or consider the television role played by Peter Falk in "Colombo." His behavior as a "dumb" or "naive" detective rarely threatens his suspects; they begin to trust him and tell him everything he needs to know.

Non-Examples

Many discussion leaders rely heavily on "non-acceptance" language which turns people off and makes them feel resentful, defensive, or inferior. Examples:

- Threatening - "You better have some good ideas." (Or else!)
- Preaching - "You shouldn't think that way."
- Judging - "Your ideas won't work."
- Labeling - "You're just a lazy student."
- Agreeing - "You're correct." (Even though the data refute the person's point of view)
- Supporting - "We all have felt like you."
- Interrogating - "Haven't you any facts to support your opinion?!"

INTRODUCTION TO CLASSROOM DISCUSSION LEADERSHIP SKILLS

A number of techniques can be used to stimulate and motivate students to participate in group discussions. In general, these techniques encourage students to openly express their ideas and opinions by minimizing their fear of embarrassment or unfair criticism.

The first six skills discussed below help instructors to manage the flow of ideas and opinions, involve all students in discussion and avoid emotion-laden situations. The second set of six skills will help the instructor to manage emotion-laden situations; those in which there are strong feelings of anger, hostility, fear, etc. Emotion-laden situations are often critical and difficult to handle, but are relatively uncommon when other (nonemotional) discussion situations are handled well. For example, if a student continually introduces irrelevant points into a discussion, other students may become highly critical of him and launch an attack that will lead to an emotional exchange. When such emotion-laden situations arise, they must be dealt with immediately because they interfere with rational discussion.

INITIATION OF A DISCUSSION

Once the goal or purpose of the discussion has been announced and the agenda and "ground rules" have been agreed upon, the instructor should write the problem, issue, or topic on a chalkboard, state that ideas are wanted ("Does anyone have any suggestions?"), and use nonverbal means to elicit them.

Examples of nonverbal techniques:

- (1) Indicate (coax) with the hand that ideas or opinions are wanted.
- (2) Cue with the chalk that the instructor is ready to write.
- (3) Attend to students by approaching them or making eye contact to "nudge" them into sharing their opinions or information.

CHECKLIST FOR THE TWELVE SKILLS

EMOTION-FREE SITUATIONS

If students:

1. Contribute relevant or irrelevant ideas/feelings/issues/problems
2. "Cut-in" on each other
3. Make vague or incomplete statements
4. Hesitate to contribute
5. Appear to have exhausted their contributions
6. Come to the end of a part of the discussion

Then the instructor should:

1. Post ideas/feelings/issues/problems and verify
2. Gatekeep
3. Request examples or illustrations; check with others
4. Recognize initial contributions
5. Consensus-test
6. Summarize

EMOTION-LADEN SITUATIONS

If students:

1. Are silent
2. Exhibit guarded expressions
3. Display much emotion
4. Display less emotion
5. Express emotion, but at a rational level
6. Dispute/oppose/attack the group leader or members with "loaded" questions

Then the instructor should:

1. Tolerate silence
2. Make inquiry/probe
3. Hear out
4. Invite expression of emotion
5. Feed back expression of emotion and verify (post).
6. Turn "loaded" questions into problems

EMOTION-FREE SITUATIONS

Potential problem situations arise in connection with discussion groups even when no strong emotions or feelings are experienced. These situations commonly occur in connection with: (1) handling and expediting the flow of information, (2) encouraging full participation, and (3) summarizing or closing the discussion.

HANDLING AND EXPEDITING THE FLOW OF INFORMATION

Situation #1

Students contribute relevant and irrelevant ideas and feelings and/or related issues and problems.

Skill #1 - Post and Verify All Ideas, Opinions, Feelings, Reactions and Related Issues and Problems

The instructor records, in his own words, as quickly and succinctly as possible, on a chalkboard or large newsprint pad, all ideas, feelings, or problems that emerge from the discussion. Abbreviations help. Whatever is written should be verified or confirmed before proceeding.

When dealing with strong feelings, it is sometimes appropriate to record feelings alongside ideas. First, however, the instructor should check to be sure that emotion has been reduced sufficiently (see below) and that permission has been granted (people often don't like to have their feelings aired publicly).

Discussion:

Posting, as defined here, greatly facilitates and clarifies communication.

Why?

A. When their ideas are posted, students know they are being listened to; there is no way they can say they're not being listened to--

Example:

The instructor introduces a controversial or paradoxical set of facts and everyone wants to express an opinion or a related problem.

Example of "brainstorming":

If the instructor desires "brainstorming" (a "free-wheeling--anything goes" format), or senses that the class is "hot" on a topic (each idea expressed seems to "cue" more ideas), then he just lists the ideas as quickly as he can, while stating that he will obtain clarification and elaboration later.

Example:

A student says: "We could use this time to prepare for the test. Why do we have to discuss _____ today?"

The instructor asks permission to post feelings. Possible posted feedback:

- (a) "bad timing--angry(?)"
- (b) "wrong topic--frustrated(?)"

Examples:

During a discussion, out of the blue, Joe blurts out, "You know the problem with these discussions is that they go on forever and we don't seem to accomplish anything.

The instructor responds by quickly restating this complaint (in his own words) on the board: "Our discussions

the proof is in front of them. Further, by checking back with them, the instructor allows them to verify that what was written is accurate (on target).

B. The act of posting students' contributions is reinforcing to them; it serves to increase their rate of participation.

C. Posting enables the instructor and students to handle information overload--when there are too many ideas (7+2), generated too quickly.

D. Posting makes a public record for use later; information is neither lost nor forgotten.

E. Emotion-laden issues or concerns are often vaguely held in the mind and easily become exaggerated. When such issues are verbalized, especially publicly on a chalkboard and are restated in non-emotional, objective and clear terms, exaggerated feelings are focused and often disappear.

F. If a student dominates or keeps repeating his ideas over and over, he can easily be shown that he already has been heard, thereby politely shutting him off and saving time.

Posting also helps the instructor to be a better discussion leader:

A. Posting slows the instructor down and keeps him from talking; he has to listen to be able to write. It forces him to pay attention and prevents him from dominating.

--too long, no results." He then asks, "Does this indicate what you wanted us to know?" Joe answers, "Yeah, that's it. You've got it." (verification)

NOTE: With new groups it sometimes pays to make a mistake on purpose and then to ask for verification--just to establish the norm that it's "ok" to correct the instructor.

Sue is pleased that her ideas are being recorded; she plans to speak up in class more often now. She feels her ideas won't be ignored or "put down" like they have in the past.

At first the instructor didn't want to run to the board, but after the fourth suggestion he knew he had to; he couldn't handle all of the information generated.

The instructor asks, "Can we postpone resolving this issue until after we discuss our original issue?" Joe agrees, he feels that since his issue has been posted it won't be forgotten.

Amy had difficulty telling the class what she felt. She didn't know why her point of view worried her so; it kept her from concentrating on other issues. But after it was posted, objectively, she began to realize it was not so bad after all.

Al remembers when Sam used to get so excited that he would keep repeating his ideas over and over. But when the instructor began to write them down and verify them, Sam quit his rambling.

Al also remembers that before the instructor began posting ideas, he would always get into arguments--mainly because he kept interrupting and misinterpreting what was said.

B. Posting sets a climate which suggests that the instructor is concerned about participants' feelings and problems. Since problems, relevant or irrelevant, may arise at any time during a discussion, posting indicates that the instructor is willing to listen and lead the class in problem-solving, if necessary.

Situation #2

Whenever an active discussion gets underway, the flow of information often exceeds the capabilities of participants. In such situations, students may cut each other off or fail to follow up on each others' contributions.

Skill #2 - Gatekeep the Flow of Information

Posting helps to slow down the flow of information and to structure it, but the instructor also needs to perform the function of a disciplinarian--who gives a green light to one student to speak while he "holds up" others until he has checked to be sure he has accurately and completely recorded what the first has expressed, has verified it and has allowed time for others to add to it or comment on it.

If this function is not performed:

- (a) good ideas are sometimes lost forever,
- (b) students are cut off in mid-sentence (thereby irritating them), or worse,
- (c) students start talking among themselves about other issues

The intent of "gatekeeping" is to accept all ideas, opinions, feelings, problems, etc., as quickly, expeditiously and efficiently as possible without losing ideas or irritating students.

Now Al feels that the instructor listens real well and, in contrast, leads the class in problem-solving discussions whenever problems or frustrations arise.

Example:

Joe is explaining one of his ideas and Sam "cuts in" to offer another idea. Before Sam gets a few words out, the instructor "cuts in" to state: "Could you hold that for a few minutes? We're still working on Joe's suggestion. But, hang on to it--write it down--I'll get back to you. I don't want to lose your idea either."

Joe is pleased to have the instructor act as a "traffic cop." In the past it seemed that every time he presented an idea, someone would always jump in with their own idea. This not only made Joe angry, but it also meant that Joe would have to bring the idea up again later, if it wasn't forgotten and lost in the meanwhile. Hearing everyone out first saves time in the long run and keeps the class focused.

Ideas or problems that are irrelevant to the central theme of the discussion can be postponed by recording them in the corner of the board, with the pledge that they will be dealt with later.

Although the instructor should decide quickly whether or not to put "irrelevant" ideas on a "hold" list, it is important that the originator's acceptance of such an act be obtained before doing so--his/her ideas may really be pertinent to the topic at hand.

ENCOURAGING FULL PARTICIPATION

Situation #3

Students attempt to express themselves with incomplete or vague statements.

Skill #3 - Request Examples or Illustrations

When class members express incomplete or vague ideas, the instructor should ask them to elaborate with specific examples or illustrations.

Such questions should encourage expression; questions that suggest cross-examination or evaluation can be threatening and cause answers to become brief and guarded.

If the instructor thinks he understands, he might take a "stab" and test out if his understanding is correct. Or, he might also check with other students to see if they would like to take a "stab" at checking out their understanding or if they would like to elaborate on or clarify what's been said.

Here, as elsewhere, the instructor does not call on those who are quiet. If he does, he threatens those who have nothing worthwhile to contribute. Rather than listening to the ongoing discussion, they will become overly concerned about coming up with "good" responses.

Sam says, "I just wanted to point out that parking is getting to be a real problem."

The instructor responds with, "That problem is tangential to our discussion, but it sounds like a problem that bears discussion. Is it okay if I jot down 'parking' under our list of 'other problems' and proceed with our discussion?"

Sam responds with, "Okay for now, but we've got to solve that parking problem soon!"

Example:

A student seems to have something to offer but the instructor doesn't understand what it is. He might say:

"I'm not sure I understand what you said. Could you give me an example?"
"How do you mean that?"
"Can you elaborate on that?"
"Let me see if I'm understanding what you're saying...."

Non-Examples ("cross-examination")

"Why do you say that?"
"Where's your evidence?"
"How do you know?"

Examples:

"Can anyone state in their own words what they understand is being said?" (Use nonverbal coaxing to elicit contributions.)

"Can someone elaborate or give us some examples, so that we can be sure we understand?"

Situation #4

Students are reluctant to contribute to the discussion (for a variety of reasons).

Skill #4 - Encourage and Recognize "Any" Contributions by finding something "good" in them, by restating them in your own words, by posting and adding to them and by asking others to add to them.

Verbal recognition of students' initial contributions, if positively stated, usually cause students to participate more often. Verbal recognition can be used whenever the opportunity arises: (a) when non-verbal behavior (such as half-raised hand) indicates a readiness to respond, (b) when a hesitant first attempt occurs, or (c) when a student adds an idea or example to someone else's contribution.

With a new class, recognizing "good" in every contribution helps to get ideas out of everyone. But with ongoing groups, reinforce only acts of contributing, unless you can remember to reinforce all ideas contributed. Why? By reinforcing only some ideas, other ideas are not reinforced. Those students whose ideas are not reinforced will feel that they are somehow not as worthwhile. The instructor cannot afford to be evaluative of ideas (even positively). He should remain non-evaluative and accepting until an appropriate time for evaluation eventually occurs.

Not only is recognition useful in getting shy or reluctant members to contribute, it is also useful when students contribute "half-baked" ideas --ones that just spontaneously "popped" into their heads. If the instructor accepts such contributions by posting them and recognizes them further with some words of encouragement, he may cause others to build or "piggyback" on the contributions and turn them (by synthesis of ideas) into really innovative results.

Example:

After discussing the situation with Joe, the instructor discovers that Joe has good ideas to contribute to the discussion, but is afraid to express them aloud (in the past some of his ideas have been laughed at by others and he has been embarrassed).

So, instead of "forcing" contributions, which only generates defensive reactions or fear, the instructor:

First, waits until Joe makes any first, small attempt at contributing, or uses nonverbal means (e.g., a coaxing gesture with his hands) to elicit contributions from Joe.

Then he recognizes Joe's contributions by saying something like, "Joe, I'm pleased to hear your ideas. Keep it up. I like everyone to contribute."

Finally, he puts Joe's example on the board and adds to it or asks others to add to it.

Non-Examples (forcing and over-recognizing contributions):

"Joe, what do you think of Mary's idea?"

Joe mumbles something that is really not very meaningful. (He was put on the spot.)

"That's a great idea Joe; you really are doing a good job!" (This response probably embarrasses Joe and makes the other students wonder why their ideas weren't similarly recognized.)

Example:

Ted suddenly throws out a tentative, partially thought out idea. Instead of saying something like: "Can't you be more clear about what you're talking about?" or "Does anyone else have a better idea?", the instructor says: "I'm glad you brought that idea up. It seems to be different from the rest. Let's see if it will get the rest of us thinking. Let's free associate. What does it cause you to think of?"

DECIDING TO MOVE THE DISCUSSION ON AND SUMMARIZING OR CLOSING THE DISCUSSION

Situation #5

Students seem to have voiced all of their opinions, ideas or solutions.

Skill #5 - Consensus-test repeatedly until all participants are willing to go ahead to the next step in the discussion or problem-solving sequence

To make certain that all members are really ready, the instructor should encourage everyone to express their opinions. Consensus-testing is not asking class members to vote; it means seeing that each and every member is sufficiently satisfied to proceed and has had enough time to be sure.

Situation #6

Discussion begins to drift to other topics or closure is felt.

Skill #6 - Summarize What Has Been Said and Ask for Verification

Students who participate in a discussion usually want evidence that their time and energy have been spent productively. Summaries also provide closure to what has been expressed.

In any discussion, breaks in the flow of information offer natural occasions for summarizing. Of course, if ideas and problems have been posted, summarizing is easy; the instructor merely has to review what was written and obtain verification that it does, in fact, describe accurately what has been said.

Several summary-oriented functions that can be performed are:

- (a) combine two or more ideas
- (b) identify a problem from a number of examples or incidents
- (c) separate a series of ideas into two or more problems or issues.

Example:

The students seem to have voiced all of their objections to a proposed change in the current ground rules for running group discussions. The instructor might say, "Has everyone expressed their thoughts on this issue?" "Are we ready to summarize what's been said?" "Take your time-- I want to make sure we have exhausted all of our objections to the change."

Example:

During a discussion of a topic, several ideas/feelings not associated with the topic seem to have been captured on the board. This "hidden agenda" reads:

"group is apathetic"
"our goals unclear"
"where are we headed?"

The instructor realizes that he ought to try and summarize these feelings and identify the underlying problem. So he says:

"It seems that a problem underlies our discussion today. Let me take a stab at identifying it: 'How can we state our goals so that they are clear and will elicit commitment to our discussion?'....Is that correct?"

HANDLING EMOTION-LADEN SITUATIONS

Emotion-laden situations arise from a variety of sources, particularly those in which the student feels he is being evaluated. Students, also, react to such situations in different ways. Their reactions may be hidden or overt, defensive ("don't blame me"), or show up in the form of withdrawal or attacks on others. The most common emotion-laden situations are those in which: (1) students hide their emotions and feelings, (2) students intensely express or display their emotions, and (3) students attack the instructor.

HIDDEN EXPRESSIONS OF EMOTION

Situation #1

Sometimes instructors (or students) pose problems, ask questions, or introduce opinions which generate feelings of anger, hostility or threat and no response occurs. Students are afraid to reveal their real feelings; they may recall being criticized for doing so in the past:

Skill #1 - Become Silent

By being silent and using non-verbal signals, the instructor "forces" students to begin talking. Once one starts, others will soon follow.

In general, whenever questions are asked, tolerate silence; students are thinking. Thinking takes time.

If the instructor feels that students misunderstand the question, he repeats it. If he suspects that something else is behind the silence, he begins to inquire.

Situation #2

Students often reveal their hidden feelings with quick, but guarded, verbal expressions or with nonverbal behavior. Allowing these "loaded" or "hidden" expressions to go by unrecognized, leads to misinterpretations, false conclusions. To avoid such consequences, the instructor should:

Skill #2 - Inquire (politely) into the feelings behind the guarded expressions.

Example:

An instructor expresses his concern about students arriving late. (He doesn't realize that this norm has been established because he has been arriving late himself. Each student is reluctant to state this fact.)

Sensing that the silence signifies a reluctance to speak, the instructor posts the issue on the board, takes a piece of chalk in his hand and indicates he is ready to write. He looks at the students, coaxes them with his hands and waits.

Due to his tolerance of silence, Sue finally says, "We ought to start class on time."

The instructor asks the class if they agree. (They do.) Then he repeats the issue. No one speaks. After a pause he inquires, "Could someone tell me why there is so much silence?"....

Example:

After a change in classroom procedure is announced, one student says, "Oh, no!" and looks up at the ceiling.

The instructor might respond by saying "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I sense that you are concerned about this change. Could you share this concern with us? I'd like to understand how you feel about this change."
.....(silence)

If one knows one's students well, any behavior which deviates from normal may be a guarded expression. For example, folded arms may indicate disagreement. But nonverbal behavior, especially, must be checked, (e.g., the individual may just be cold).

Example:

"I've waited for someone to speak, much longer than normal. Would anyone please tell me what's causing you to behave so differently?"

Once students have been urged to express their emotions, the instructor must be careful to display the right amount of acceptance behavior. The three skills below can usually be used in sequence to reduce emotion from a high level to a rational level.

ACTIVE EXPRESSION OF EMOTION

Situation #3

Several students are actively displaying emotional displeasure or are talking rapidly:

Skill #3 - Hear Out Their Views by Saying Nothing

Saying nothing is one way of demonstrating "acceptance"--just the fact that you are listening in a non-verbal way demonstrates "acceptance."

When students are obviously very emotional and argumentative, any hint of evaluation may elicit defensive behavior or attacks on the instructor.

Situation #4

When the students begin to reduce their emotion, slow down, are hesitating or pause:

Skill #4 - Invite Further Expression of Emotion

This behavior keeps the "door open." It encourages more sharing of ideas or feelings and demonstrates, again, a nonevaluative stance.

At this time, the instructor might appear to be slightly bewildered (Colombo!), thereby indicating that he may have failed to understand and wants to be corrected.

Examples:

Attend to the individuals; maintain eye contact; lean forward.

Also, you might say "um hum" or nod your head up and down to indicate that you are listening.

Example:

After spending two frustrating hours trying to complete an experiment, a student finally asks the lab instructor for help.

Due to the late hour, he replies, "It doesn't matter if you don't complete the experiment."

Whereupon the student throws his equipment on the floor and runs out of the lab crying.

Examples:

You might say:

"I'm interested in your point of view." (I'd like to know how you feel.)

"I'm not sure I understand--could you tell me more?" (suggestion)

"I'm learning something new from you. This is news to me."

This technique should not be overplayed, however. It's most useful when dealing with what appear to be inconsistent statements. The instructor must be careful not to contradict or "cross-examine" in any way.

Situation #5

When the students' emotion eventually calms down to the point where it seems safe to say something to prove you are listening--take a "stab" and:

Skill #4 - Reflect or Feed Back, in your own words, what you think are the feelings behind what the students have said--and then ask for verification of the accuracy of your statement.

When feeding back expressions of feeling, you must be careful not to just mirror or "parrot" back identical words.

We all recognize the strong feelings of others, at least at a gut level, but it's rare for most of us to verbalize them or to clarify them back. It's not really difficult, however. All you have to do is take a "stab" at what you think the feelings are that lie behind the message. And it doesn't really matter if you are wrong in your probe--just as long as you ask for verification--and get it.

Although most of us feedback feelings far too little, it is possible to do it too much. First, you'll sound suspicious after awhile. Second, you can't reveal your own ideas if you're constantly feeding back others' ideas and feelings.

Non-Examples:

"Tell me more!" (command)

Cut in or interrupt with questions like, "Why are you so angry?" (interrogative)

"I understand." (impossible, unless checked out)

Example:

A student says: "I'm really fed up with your trying to get us to change our opinions!"

Possible feedback and verification of this feeling might be:

- (a) "You feel angry every time you are asked to reconsider your opinions." (?) (The question mark implies you are asking for verification.)
- (b) "You feel that my challenging your ideas is unfair and presumptuous and that makes you angry and frustrated." (?) "Is that correct?"

Note the difference between the two examples below. By making a specific probe and seeking verification, the instructor in the second example brings out the feelings and the reasons behind the original message.

Example of Parroting

Joe: "Sue should never have become a group discussion leader!"

Sam: "You mean leading group discussions isn't the right job for her?"

Joe: "Exactly! Group leadership is not the right job for her."

Examples of Clarifying Feelings

Joe: "Sue should never have become a group discussion leader!"

Sam: "You mean you feel she's too easy going? Maybe even permissive?"

Therefore, only feedback feelings when students are emotional and you realize that their emotions are interfering with rational discussion--or are leading into arguments.

When confronted by emotional students, it may be difficult for you to provide feedback about their feelings to them. Strong emotions usually generate defensive behavior on the part of both parties. Both of you will probably want to counter argue or attempt to defend and clarify your position before you try to understand the other person's point of view. Even if you discipline yourself to listen, you still may distort or deny parts of the message. In such cases, feeding back feelings and verifying them becomes crucial; it helps to insure that the real message gets through.

Remember, if students' feelings aren't recognized for what they really are, they'll probably just "simmer" and come out later and be directed at you or someone else in the class.

ATTACKS ON THE INSTRUCTOR

Situation #6

Sometimes when students feel defensive, they lash out ("the best defense is a good offense"). Typically, their attack takes the form of a negatively "loaded" question directed toward the discussion leader:

Skill #6 - Turn the Attack into a Problem for the Class to Solve

As a consequence, neither the questioner nor the group leader is placed in a "face-saving" situation with respect to the issue. Defensiveness can be minimized.

Joe: "Oh, no. I mean she writes too slowly. We all get bored."

Sam: "Oh, I see. You think that she should let someone else lead group discussions?"

Joe: "Exactly! Group leadership is not the right job for her."

Example:

Tom: "I really don't appreciate the way you are running this discussion! It seems to me that you are only interested in Sue and Hal's input, not mine!"

Ben: "What you seem to be telling me is that this discussion would be more meaningful for you if I asked you for more input; is that right?"

Tom: "No, that's not right--now you misread my intent!"

Ben: "You're angry because I'm showing favoritism; is that correct?"

Tom: "Right! Now you understand me."

Example:

Because one student likes structure in his life, he is uptight with what he considers to be a permissive attitude on your part toward enforcement of the "ground rules" for conducting group discussion. He says to the instructor (in an obviously hostile way): "Suppose a group member deliberately violates a 'ground rule.' Do you mean you're going to let him get away with it?"

If the instructor answers "yes," he may appear permissive and have to defend himself, thereby slipping into an argument. On the other hand, if he answers "no," he may appear to be backing down and may again slip into an argument. (He can't win it seems.)

If the question is of a technical nature, the leader might express his own ideas but not try to prove he is right (he'll slip into an "I win/You lose" argument). Instead, he should accept any disagreement, encourage others to express their opinions or feelings and summarize what is said. With high emotions present, this will do far more to influence attitude change, constructively, than will facts and opinions of an authority.

Instead, he might say, "Let's see what the rest of you feel about that. Does anyone have a recent, specific example of a class member who has violated a rule and gotten away with it-- and what were the consequences?"

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